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ABSTRACT

An assessment of newspapers from ghost towns in the United States is proposed in this paper as a means of improving the definitions of frontier journalism beyond national time periods, expansion over geographical space, and primitive policy and practices. It is suggested that an evaluation be made by measurement and appraisal of those newspapers' coverage of community functions to detect when they provided environmental surveillance so as to warn or forecast possible signs of community decline. A list of guiding questions and a review of the literature of frontier advocacy journalism is provided. A news content analysis of the quality of life in areas of land use and development, economics, transportation, human/group relations, government, health, information/education, recreation/entertainment, and natural resources is suggested. (Author/MKM)

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AN 'AUTOPSY' APPROACH TO FRONTIER PRESS HISTORY: THE GHOST TOWN NEWSPAPER

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AN 'AUTOPSY' APPROACH TO FRONTIER PRESS HISTORY: THE GHOST TOWN NEWSPAPER

Introduction: Purpose

Definitions of the American frontier press appear to mix nationalistic and chronological time with the geographical space of Western expansion and primitive journalistic policy and practices. Instead of any derived process or theory, there are periods of time and space most frequently labeled as frontier journalism such as migration west of the Appalachians (1786-1810); and pre and post-Civil War periods of westward movement (1833-1860 and 1865-1900). [1]

Also called pioneer, territorial and Western, frontier journalism has been described as promotional boosterism to encourage migration, political doctrine or religious propaganda, personalized, opinionated, provincial, robust, lusty, sensational, colorful, flamboyant, distorted, vindictive, and involving public contributions and reprints to small, handset, scrubby presses. [2] There is implication that such characteristics were past and earlier qualities of surviving metropolitan dailies.

A more useful conceptual framework might be to place the frontier press in a more functional perspective not limited to mere historical time and space. Since "the city threatens to substitute for the frontier

or settlement of the West, as the key to explaining the evolution of American life", and since the "relationship between communications and urbanization has not been systematically explored", perhaps the tool of the urban process could be used to explain the frontier press.[3] Of note is the fact that the end of the frontier was fixed by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, the same year as the Columbian Exposition made Americans aware of urban planning and problems.

However, frontier ends and boundaries in time and space face the notion that "the frontier is a series of conceptions, not merely a set of facts. These conceptions are linked with various rural and urban virtues with different periods of our history, and with particular American regions as well. In those sections of the country where the frontier as a geographic reality has but recently disappeared, the frontier as a concept refers more to the mining camps and the railroad center than to pioneer agricultural settlements."[4]

Others argue that the statistical end of the frontier may have been indicated statistically in the 1880 census and sociologically in 1920 with the end of agriculture and the rise of the mass production economy tied to mass media and the urban mass mind.[5] "Sometime between 1915 and 1920 the old rural majority living on the producing land, or close to it in small towns and villages, became a minority. The changes resulting from the transformation from a rural to an urban nation were to be just as momentous as those that had accompanied the conversion of the frontier into a settled land."[6]

Perhaps one way to examine frontier journalism is to concentrate on those country-rural weeklies in small boom towns that flourished in Rocky Mountain mining areas between the 1849 Gold Rush and the

1893 and 1897 Silver Panics. Many of those ghost towns and their newspapers provide "archeology above ground" and a readily available "historical experiment" in frontier communication and communication history. Such frontier newspapers might provide a microscopic barometer on the society and culture of both the local and larger community.[7]

Existing studies on the frontier press can be sifted and sorted for clues as to whether this press genre provided consensus, cohesion and surveillance,[8] and whether the biographic, episodic, trite and often antiquarian booster accounts reveal a conceptual framework,[9] or a natural history of the newspaper.[10] This might detect the impact of the urbanization process on the press and their towns, whereas an assessment of the social responsibility [11]of those newspapers might be found through an evaluation of their coverage of basic community functions essential to the growth, prosperity and stability (or decline) of ghost towns.

Evidence in Literature

The booster language on the frontier was useful to make hardship bearable and exaggeration and praise were a way to cope with the harsh realities of nature. Frontier language reflected optimism, conquest, individualism needed to open and settle new territory.[12] Before newspapers in frontier mining towns, communication was largely institutional and interpersonal.[13] When newspapers came, they reinforced the language of boosterism and became active agents in building frontier towns.[14]

The frontier editor was "the enlightener of the backwoods" who "bought and sold the public lands, promoted the settlement of villages, framed and interpreted the backwoods laws, saved the pioneers' souls and taught their children."[15] Generally, the early newspaperman responded to and nurtured growth and "went wherever society was going, to

the very limits of settlement. The newspaper served as a handmaid of commerce..."[16] It even created the chamber of commerce[17] or served as one in fact, and the participant/observer role for the newspaper often merged civic and governmental activity and made the city and press synonymous.[18] Early and continuing histories of surviving frontier newspapers fully document the close press and community ties,[19] and one journalism historian suggests that it is impossible "to separate the history of a single newspaper from the history of the times during which the newspaper was published."[20]

Urban historians of the frontier found that the newspaper was "the most important unifying element of urban culture" and often kept struggling cities alive during early adversity.[22] Published post-mortems on both towns and newspapers which did not survive reveal that press-community cohesion. Like earlier colonial journalists, editors were printers and part of the business, political, governmental or military establishment. Pioneer publishers were heavily dependent on income from business cards, handbills, and other job printing. Politics was often a means to get business contacts. One account of such editors in Missouri, 1808-1860, follows:[23]

> "The true pioneer editor was the printer... As newspapers became more political in tone, the politician-editor, who devoted only part of his time to the enterprise, began to crowd the printer out... Indeed, in many cases where politics had become the underlying cause for a newspaper's existence, the words 'editor' and 'politician' became synonymous terms."

In Westward expansion and mining areas, editors and their presses often arrived before prospectors, and like them, were often as temporary and unsuccessful before moving on to the next mineral strike. Montana's first printing was tied to where gold was first found there in 1863. In Washington Territory, the best customer for printers was

another early arrival, the government with its need for publicity on notices, laws, reports, and journals.[24]

"The newspapers of the early-day mining camps played an important role in the growth and settlement of Colorado. For many of the isolated camps, the press provided the only link with what was going on in the rest of the country. These early newspapers were usually partisan in their politics and outspoken on issues of the day. The editors all had one thing in common--an abundant optimism about their own particular areas."[25] Many became ghost towns along with the optimistic press.[26]

One such mining town, Georgetown, Colorado, nourished 14 publications (10 weeklies, two dailies, two monthlies) in a 37-year period from 1867-1904, from its more than 10,000 population as the "Silver Queen of the Rockies" to its ghost town tourism status of a few hundred shortly after 1900. Provincial boosterism dominated newspapers, which lasted from one week to as long as 20 years.

"We are here to work for the mining interest," and are "convinced of the future prosperity and greatness of this mining district.... in the hands of Colorado men, to be used in the development and improvement of our Territory, instead of the Wall Street stock gamblers, whose course thus far had proved ruinous to our best interests."[27] While such papers publicized the West and mineral prosperity, "Seldom, then, did the frontier journals indulge in the luxury of editorializing about the seamier side of frontier living.... Colorado's early press did not accurately and truthfully reflect the town and people it purported to represent. Far too often the papers were concerned solely with the serious business of attracting immigration, of demonstrating that life in a mining camp or back-country hamlet was not as rough and lawless as

the easterner was conditioned to believe."[28]

Therefore the town's press image was paramount, and that allowed some concern and outrage e.g., on alcoholism and "our duty to detail the shocking depravity of humanity when they indulge in strong drink" before a tavern murder; and support for taxes "as nothing conduces so much to the reputation of a place as good schools."[29]

Even relatively independent Populist editors affected by economic pressures lean heavily on "the threat to silver, the sins perpetuated at the courthouse, the potential menace to new investment, and the perennial battle with the local opposition editor...."[30] While rugged and often eccentric pioneer editors would go so far as to use oxen and their own backs to transport presses across snowy mountain ranges to publish the first paper in a log cabin,[31] their individualism "rarely varied much from the norms of the community.... In spite of his independence, the editor was a rather passive leader in society. He did not carry on very substantial crusades, except in politics, nor conceive many new reforms for the improvement of society."[32]

The literature of frontier journalism does not reveal if the social responsibility of the newspapers was greater in stable areas less dependent on mining than in transient, ghost-towns-to-be. Border-town Kansas editors, for example, published negative as well as positive news on the 1859 gold rush to Pike's Peak, although they were at some distance and figured to also prosper from the migration.[33]

One study of the Colorado frontier papers suggests that "There can be no doubt that while the frontier settlement was in its 'boom or bust' stage, its newspaper was anything but a free agent.... Only later, after the town grew and prospered, did the newspaper become less an instrument of the merchant class and more an independent

agent."[34] Such appears to have been true for the New Mexico Territorial press, which spent early years attracting the railroads, developing mining, and Americanizing the Spanish-speaking immigrants, but failed to establish its editorial independence until late in its era of 1834-1912.[35]

Similarly in Montana, as the economy was less dependent on the mining of one mineral, the newspapers may have become more independent and thereby marked the end of frontier journalism there. The press had grown out of mining and politics, but when the unstable markets for gold, silver and copper were diversified with the more stable agricultural economy and the river and railroad traffic, journalism became less dependent.[36]

Unshackled journalism may have emerged as the frontier declined and boom towns boomeranged. Perhaps not merely coincidental were the decline of Western expansion and the rise of press surveillance on social conditions in cities, and the examination and press criticism of urban institutions in the Progressive Era at the turn of the Century.[37]

While newspapers on the frontier appear to have been more a cohesive than critical force, in both surviving and ghost towns, independence of editors as a crucial factor in such survival might be detected from content, since disruptive and negative news tends to be evaded by small town editors, especially when they are close to or part of the local power structure.[38] Surveillance of the environment would likely require press independence because of potential challenge to the growth ethic.

Post-Mortem on Ghost Town Press

Although life in most ghost towns is gone, there remain lengthy lists of such towns and compliations of both their newspapers and microfilm.[39] Whether those papers warned their towns of impending decline and doom or merely served as the voice of civic boosterism might reveal their social responsibility.

Dimensions of this[40] might be applied to quality of life criteria as social indicators as they apply to community economic, political, environmental, health, educational and social conditions in cities;[41] and as they might apply to state statistical rankings on the criteria of wealth, culture, health, security and civic affairs;[42] and as they might apply to both on what is the quality of community beyond the quantitative growth cliches of chamber of commerce boosterism.[43]

Ghost town newspapers could be examined for any vigilant discussion or proposed solutions to broad, basic problems in areas universal to urbanized community systems: land use and development, economic base, transportation, human and group relations, government, health and medicine, information and education, entertainment and recreation, and natural resources and the environment.

More microscopic comparisons might be made with available data on income per capita, years of schooling, newspaper readership, voting records, literacy, libraries, ratio of doctors, dentists, plumbers, infant mortality, home ownership, crime rates, pollution evidence, and a multiplicity of other indicators of the quality of life in ghost towns.

A warning of caution to researchers on such newspapers includes the reminder that pioneer editors often stretched the truth so that

booster journalism can be bad history. An authority on newspapers as historical tools explains:[44]

> "The researcher must be aware of such over-enthusiastic accounts remembering that frequently they reflected more hope than fact. An editor was one of the new town's leading citizens: the unofficial greeter of visiting dignitaries,the recorder of historical highlights, the master of ceremonies on key occasions, the adviser to political and civic leaders. Little wonder then that this spirit was carried over into his writing especially at a time when the newspapers were more the reflection of the personal views of the owners than the objective writing of today."

A list of guiding questions[45] in performing the "autopsy" on the frontier newspapers from ghost towns might include the following:

) Did the newspapers echo the quantitative growth ethic and when did they show concern for the qualitative impact of growth upon the town? Did the press "watchdog" the natural environment as well as the government on any occasion? Did it aid producers or consumers by providing DEW(distant early warning) signals that a town was facing troubles that might lead to its demise?

) Was there "preventive journalism" whereby readers got usable information for controlling their own destiny and avoiding the disasters that create saleable news copy?

) Were the newspapers passive chroniclers or investigators? Did critical independence increase with prosperity of either press or community? Did the press provide space and access for those who questioned growth and did not boost or cheer?

) Did the newspapers concentrate on events--meetings, speeches, organizations, announcements from sources of authority from the top down; or concentrate on issues, problems, processes and how people might resolve them from the bottom up?

) Was the environmental impact on the town anticipated before it arrived and were problems explained beforehand or causes provided afterward? Were solutions and alternatives suggested?

) Was the press part of the Establishment and participant as well as observer and was this evident in news content or implied?

) What image of community was conveyed in vision and values, and was the civic superlative used to "sell" the town to outsiders, defend the town's reputation, and promote consensus while evading local problems?

) Did the press ever challenge expansion or merely exploit the boom for commercial profit with little regard for planning or design of the community? Was the community eventually sacrificed for commerce without regard for its future?

) Did the press explain the town's economic base, and who paid for and who benefited from community services?
) Were national issues affecting the town discussed or were the papers narrow and provincial in their focus? Did papers explain the external (macro) forces and the internal (micro) forces which shaped the community and its destiny?

) Were minorities (racial/ethnic, women, aged, youth, handicapped and others) represented in the newspapers?

) Did the newspapers report and explain the causes and cures regarding ill-health, and for whom and at what cost?

) Was transportation dealt with as a total community function by the press, or as a means to move the elite and business interests?

) Was criticism of the press and other feedback facilitated?

) Was press emphasis on use of leisure time and recreation directed at both elite and mass culture?

) Was the natural environment guarded or exploited through the press and was there evidence of news on the costs and trade-offs on town growth that might indicate the ability of the town site to survive the pressures of growth?

Conclusion

This research approach might help improve the definitions of frontier journalism and elevate it beyond the simplistic time and space boundaries to an explanation and evaluation using a continuing process of urbanization that was taking place in America both before and after the so-called opening and closing of the frontier.

Present frontier press studies analyzed herein tend to be anecdotal and without explicit theories as to causes for this type of journalism, if indeed it is different. The proposed "autopsy" on newspapers without remaining communities might reveal possible causes of "death" for those which did not survive and thereby tell us about those which survived and live today.

Perhaps the "disease" of boosterism and primitive journalism of subjective invective and establishment ties of the frontier press are blamed unfairly on papers that died. The press ghosts of boosterism

are still alive in big city newsrooms today and the cozy press relationships with business, government and others remains an ethical dilemma.[46]

The true boundaries of frontier journalism may still remain in the minds of editors and publishers who still preach and practice the growth ethic that "bigger is better"; and in the public's nostalgic desire to escape to the natural environment--ghost towns included! The anti-city and pro-small-town tradition is strong in the American journalist,[47] and today's press still reflects small town pastoralism.

"The rural and anti-industrial values which Thomas Jefferson is usually thought to have invented can also be found in the news, which favors small towns (agricultural or market) over other types of settlements....the pastoral values underlying the news are romantic; they visualize rural and market towns as they were imagined to have existed in the past."[48] The frontier press may be a psychological notion that continues regardless of time, space or process and regardless of urban, small town or rural settings which may or may not survive crisis.

Studies of disasters and crises have become useful contexts for studying the nature of communications.[49] This proposed use of the ghost town autopsy(as a "historical experiment" that failed)might add to that approach. The press role in the energy resources crisis (especially in the West)[50] adds another related aspect, as do recent, new studies on frontier cities, environment, and even Rocky Mountain mining saloons as an important community institution.[51]

If exhumation of the past press tells us that growth can kill like cancer, then it may be a warning for the small mining town newspaper which today optimismistically avoids the negative consequences of economic expansion and gives the community what it wants and expects.[52]

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